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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/13/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER CONCERNED BY HUGHES CANCELLATION

REF: A. GRAY/GODEC 1/30/07 EMAIL
[1](#)B. 06 TUNIS 2856

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: On February 13, Foreign Minister Abdallah convoked Ambassador to express his concern about the cancellation of a planned visit to Tunisia by Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes. Abdallah referred to an internal "report" prepared by MFA Secretary of State Chtioui that suggested Ambassador, in a January 30 meeting with Chtioui, had said U/S Hughes canceled due to a lack of political progress in Tunisia. Ambassador explained that U/S Hughes could not visit at this time due to scheduling issues, but was open to a visit at another time. He continued that his comments on Tunisia's political progress were designed to give Chtioui a sense of the Washington's broad concerns regarding Tunisia and were a general perspective. After providing an overview of Tunisia's political progress and willingness to support US priorities in the region, Abdallah said Chtioui was to blame for his misunderstanding of the context. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) After initial pleasantries, Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah said that he was "very surprised" by the reasons for the Hughes cancellation as outlined in a report prepared by MFA Secretary of State for Asia and the Americas Saida Chtioui. (NOTE: On January 30, Ambassador briefed Chtioui regarding Hughes' decision not to visit Tunisia (Ref A). END NOTE.) Reading from the report (in French), Abdallah quoted, "Hughes canceled her trip because Tunisia is not making enough progress on political matters, particularly a lack of liberty." Abdallah also noted Washington requests for greater Tunisian support for Iraq and Afghanistan. Ambassador explained that the report was inaccurate and clarified for the FM that Hughes had canceled for a variety of reasons, including a busy schedule and other commitments. He added that a visit at another time might be possible. Abdallah said, "That's exactly what I wanted to hear."

[1](#)3. (S/NF) Ambassador went on to explain that he had used the opportunity to explain to Chtioui current USG thinking about Tunisia and the general Washington atmosphere. (NOTE: In the meeting with Chtioui, Ambassador had also advised her that Tunisian Ambassador to Washington Mohamed Nejib Hachana would be directly informed about the Hughes cancellation. Ambassador went on to say that, as he had recently worked in Washington, he wanted to speak frankly with Chtioui about Washington views regarding Tunisia and regional issues. END NOTE.) Ambassador told Abdallah that Tunisia could and should do more on political liberalization, stressing that if Tunisia wants more USG high-level interaction, assistance and support, the GOT must do more to show its political progress. Ambassador also noted that Washington is deeply engaged with many challenges in the region, including Iraq and the Middle

East Peace Process and would welcome further and more active support from Tunisia.

14. (S/NF) Abdallah responded with a long explanation of Tunisia's "slow but sure" political progress. Specifically, Abdallah said that press freedom had noticeably increased in the past two years and stressed that the level of press freedom in the United States is unique in the world. Ambassador noted that the recent establishment of a new opposition party newspaper was a positive step (Ref B). On regional issues, Abdallah said that Tunisia is "completely ready" to support Iraq or Afghanistan through training provided in Tunisia and funded by third parties. Abdallah added that Tunisia "always helps" in the Arab League.

15. (S/NF) Abdallah closed by saying that he was pleased to have spoken directly with the Ambassador, noting that he believes Secretary of State Chtioui is always "too hard" and that he may "ban" her from talking to foreign ambassadors. Not wanting to take sides in an intra-MFA tiff, Ambassador commented that perhaps he was not clear in his initial conversation with Chtioui. (NOTE: Chtioui or her notetaker, MFA Americas Director Holla Bachtobji, may have misunderstood the framework of Ambassador's January 30 discussion, which was conducted in English. END NOTE.)

16. (S/NF) COMMENT: Post has noticed increased MFA jockeying for position in the past few months. MFA Chief of Staff Hatem Atallah (former MFA DG for the Americas and Asia - A/S equivalent and former Tunisian Ambassador to Washington), who sat in on this meeting, has recently increased his interaction with Embassy. Atallah has asked on multiple occasions that sensitive bilateral issues (SOFA discussions, Guantanamo detainee repatriation) be referred directly to him for

action. Meanwhile, Chtioui (one of three Deputy Foreign Ministers) has increasingly been marginalized, even complaining that she did not meet with NEA/DAS Carpenter during his January visit. (NOTE: Carpenter met with the Foreign Minister, accompanied by the current MFA DG for the Americas and Asia, Chtioui's subordinate, rather than Chtioui. END NOTE.) Chtioui also implicitly complained to DCM in December that her requests to take an official trip to the United States (she has never been during her almost 5-year tenure as the MFA person in charge of the Americas) are not acted on. When asked if rumored shake-ups at the MFA will include her, she answers with words to the effect of, "I'm sure you know more than I do about that." Atallah, who has served as MFA Chief of Staff three times, may be hoping to displace Chtioui, whose tenure in this position predates FM Abdallah, as Secretary of State. Such a move could positively impact US-Tunisian relations, as Atallah is a seasoned diplomat with a strong understanding of Washington priorities. END COMMENT.

17. (S) NOTE: Ambassador also used the meeting with the FM and Atallah to cover several other priority issues, from detainees to possible MEPI programs. These issues will be covered in separate messages or by e-mail.

8 (S) BIO NOTE: Abdallah stressed how close Tunisians, and he in particular, feel to the American people. He said his wife only watches US television programs and films, and that he particularly enjoys "The Shield."
GODEC